

Witness

Keith Brooke

Boy flew from the little clearing and, buffeted by a sudden updraft, was hurled up above the first of the trees. He twisted his supple body and turned, coming back so that the rising air would take him up into the blue and all he had to do was spread his wings and soar.

Ruig looked on wistfully. Boy was a part of him, his own child, yet Ruig's own feet were fixed to the ground, not tucked up under his belly like those of a bird.

Boy was a speck and then he was gone.

Ruig sat back, resting his elbows on the rising ground. He listened to the screeches and pipings of birds and animals from the surrounding undergrowth; somewhere in the distance, he thought he could hear the hum of agricultural machinery. He looked up at the blue sky, drifted over with wisps of white. He would give the boy a few minutes more – he knew how he liked to soar when the day was such as this.

But when he came down he would work him hard: Boy knew he must pay for his moments of pleasure. If he wasn't pushed to his limits then his muscle condition would deteriorate and he would become fat and lazy and the flying edge would be lost.

Ruig took a long pull of perry from the flask he carried on his diagonal chest belt. Two days ago, he had been Witness at Charlbur, a village on the banks of the River Ewenlode, and they had sent him on his way well provisioned, as the river peoples usually did.

He stood and stretched. Boy had been away longer than Ruig had intended. Often, his child would spend much of the day aloft, while Ruig walked or rode, but now was the time for his training and Ruig didn't want him to have gone too far away.

He was about to call his hawk's call when he spotted the mote up above. He squinted and waited, smiled when he saw the distinctive profile of his child's stoop: chin out, wings and legs dragged back at full stretch by the wind. He didn't have the grace of a true falcon, but his bulk and sheer, physical power were impressive, nonetheless. Boy's eyes were slitted against the rush of the air, his lips peeled back in a toothy grimace, his hair flying out behind him.

Ruig snatched the lure from his belt and swung it low. Boy twisted, spread his wings, switched from falling rock to sudden, low swoop and in an instant was past him, rising, the lure pulled away just beyond

his grasp. Boy's wing-tips had cut past Ruig's face, a leaf's width from cutting his skin. A cynic might claim that it was only Ruig's Ward that had prevented such injury, but Ruig knew it was his own, and his child's, practised skill – empathy, not gadgetry, allowed man and son to work so closely, like one person in two bodies.

He had been holding his breath, overcome, as always, by the thrill of nature. As a child he had flown finches and bats; as an adolescent, he had flown owls and falcons and an insane, augmented raven. As a young man he had worked with a sympathetic Caster to create all kinds of chimeras and augmentations, but none had ever come close to the man-child rapport he had with his son. He often dreamed of joining him in the air, of having his own body recast. But such a radical transformation did not fit with his professional life and, in any case, he had been in his own body far too long to change now.

Boy was a speck again, circling in the updraft from the gentle slope where Ruig waited.

"Boy!" he yelled, into the wind, swinging the lure in a slow, tempting circle. "Hup! Hup! Hup-hup-hup!" Still, the boy-hawk soared, although Ruig could see that he was watching the circling lure, and he knew that his child's blood would be screaming out to him to dive, stoop, catch the lure and drink of its pale fluid. Boy was his dependant in more ways than one.

There was a disturbance at the edge of the clearing, the chatter of an agitated magpie. A figure appeared at the mouth of the path Ruig had arrived by some time before. A man, tall and dark-skinned like Ruig, although this newcomer's frame was leaner, the musculature more precisely defined beneath anonymous grey trousers and dark leather cape.

Eyes met and the man glanced away to the ground. It is a rare individual who is not uncertain when meeting a Witness. Then he looked up, nodded, climbed the slope towards Ruig.

Boy was circling lower now, and Ruig snatched up the lure from where it had been lying in the sun-dry grass. Boy would take any such opportunity to steal the lure and cut his exercise short. He was no fool.

Rather than stop below Ruig on the faint track that bisected the clearing, the man circled and stopped at the same level. "Ruig," he said, and nodded in greeting.

"So your story is that the bombers really were local anti-biotech fanatics?" said Carmichael sceptically.

"They certainly had some local help," said Abel, "but we're really not sure who was behind it, in the ultimate analysis. Do you know, Dr Carmichael?"

It took Carmichael a second or two to realize that if the question was sincere Abel must mean to imply that the order might have come out of Washington. Even that was possible, and it was possible that the people who'd sent him out to check up hadn't levelled with him as to the reason for which he was being sent.

"I'm not here to find out who did it," Carmichael said cautiously. "I'm here to retrieve any information which can be retrieved regarding your research. For purely scientific reasons, we'd like to know how far advanced your project was." He glanced around at the room. It was nondescript – just another abandoned room in another abandoned house. The ragged curtains weren't completely closed, but beyond them the cloudy night was still pitch-dark.

"No doubt you were anxious," Abel purred, "because I was a little dilatory about filing my reports." Carmichael glanced at Lucy Vollman again, knowing that she must have repeated everything he'd told her, more or less word for word. This time she met his gaze steadily enough.

"Aren't we all?" he said.

"Not when they concern the war situation," said Abel. "Not that ours did, of course, except in a rather oblique fashion. Ordinarily, I might have been quite prepared to publish what we found, at the risk of meeting some hostility and ridicule, but in the present situation, I must confess, I was inclined to hesitate – and was nearly lost. You must forgive us our extreme caution, Dr Carmichael. These days, anyone who isn't paranoid is certifiably insane – isn't that what they say, back in Washington?"

Carmichael's head was clearer now, and not so painful. He sat up straighter. "Did you bring me here to give me an explanation in confidence?" he asked. "Or are you intending to hold me for ransom?"

"We brought you here because we need help – help that you can provide."

"You want me to help you get another lab?" said Carmichael disbelievingly.

Abel didn't answer the question. Instead, he said: "Lucy says you know all about the jigsaw hypothesis – chapter and verse. In that case, perhaps I can ask you to speculate a little. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the jigsaw hypothesis were true – that evolution on earth has been rebuilding a close approximation of a path that DNA has already followed elsewhere in the universe, and that human beings are just one significant step short of becoming the true kingpins of the climax community. Tell me, Dr Carmichael: what characteristics would you hope or expect to find in the *ultimate* hominids, our destined – and I do mean *destined* – successors?"

It was on the tip of Carmichael's tongue to say that the ability to grow a new set of teeth probably wouldn't come amiss, but Abel was clearly serious and there was no point in frivolity. "I don't know," he said. "The kind of things, I suppose, that genetic engineers would like to build into us: longer life, better powers of self-repair, better immunity to diseases."

"And better looks," said Franklin drily. "Don't forget better looks. That's why we've made such rapid progress in superficial somatic engineering, after all. Cosmetic engineering was the big business, until the war broke out."

"Everybody wants to be a demigod," said Carmichael. "So what?"

"That's right," said Abel. "We've always made our gods in our own image, according to our own ideals of beauty. And we've tended to assume that any progress built into the evolutionary scheme would take us in the direction of our ambitions and aspirations. If we really were to take control of the evolutionary process, that's what we'd do. But even if what we're doing, here on Earth, is mere recollection and recapitulation, what it's recollecting and recapitulating is the result of *natural* selection, where hopes and ambitions have to submit to the rigours of the struggle for existence. Would you like to see our successor species, Dr Carmichael? Would you like a glimpse into the future which awaits us, if we can't and don't take control of our own destiny?"

So it wasn't all lies, Carmichael thought. She didn't lie about the chimps. Aloud, he said: "Okay." He began to rise from his seat, but Franklin gestured him back again, before striding to the door.

"You can come in now, Mike," he said to someone waiting in another room. Apparently, the person he had spoken to was the man who had shot Carmichael back at the cabin, and he still had the gun in his hand, but he was no longer wearing the uniform to which he wasn't entitled. Presumably he had the gun ready because the creature which was with him wasn't under any kind of restraint, although it seemed quite docile. It walked through the doorway ahead of the man, and stood there staring at Carmichael. There was curiosity in its stare, but no apparent malice.

It was about five feet tall, and it walked more like a man than a chimp, although it was round-shouldered. Its features were vaguely Neanderthal – pronounced brow-ridges, bull-neck, peculiar teeth visible behind rubbery lips – but it wasn't hairy. Its hide bore only the faintest resemblance to that of a rhinoceros, but Carmichael could see how Lucy Vollman had made the connection. It was thick and tough and dark. It reminded Carmichael of the rubbery suits they used to make in Hollywood when they had to dress some luckless actor up as a thing from outer space. The hide was smooth, and there were no external genitalia – only a shapeless fold of skin that just might have been a natural codpiece. The creature's eyes were very narrow, with slit-like pupils, more like a snake's than a man's.

Carmichael and the creature looked one another over for a couple of minutes. Carmichael had to make an effort to still the beating of his anxious heart as that alien gaze bore into him, but the thing that had been a chimpanzee seemed quite relaxed.

"That's okay, Steve," said Abel, with a faint grin teasing the corners of his mouth. "You and Mike can go get dinner now." He looked at the man, so that Carmichael would know that he'd been tempted to a false conclusion when Franklin spoke earlier. "Mike" was actually the ex-chimp. As if to underline the point, Abel added: "Thanks, Mike."